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IMAGING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY:
INTERTEXTUAL PLAY AMONG POSTMODERN CHRISTIAN BLOGGERS

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Recent years have seen a growing interest in the research of religious content in online social media, including web logs, file sharing networks such as YouTube, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. While much attention has been paid to the creation of media texts for the Web, their audiences and usage, little has been given to the aesthetic dimension. For the Internet is a medium for the communication of not just literal text, but also aural and visual text. All information found on computer screens is framed by visual design, according to the affordances give to users by the technology. Drawing from my PhD study of Australian bloggers involved in the 'emerging church' movement,[1] I intend to show how the blogosphere has become more than an alternative space for religious discourse. In the design of personal web pages, use of colour schemes, templates and captioned images, these bloggers find a vehicle for the ongoing construction of religious identity in the formation of an aesthetic style.

Conceptual frames

This article aims to place the presented research at the nexus of a number of concepts that are often the focus of discussion among researchers in media, religion and culture: aesthetics; public religion in late modernity in the West; the construction of identity online; and rhetoric surrounding online social media. In an article of this scope it is impossible to explore each theme in great detail, however by introducing these concepts I hope to provide a context within which this researcher sees how bloggers negotiate religious identity. I will introduce each concept in turn.

Aesthetics

We know that Internet content is made of more than literal text, but contains visual and aural material. Therefore the experience of online media use is aesthetic as much as it is literal. Historically, the aim of aesthetics as a field of inquiry has been to explore the foundations of human interpretations of beauty. For

[1] School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne. Thesis is titled "Emerging church bloggers in Australia: Prophets, priests and rulers in God's virtual world".

Meyer and Verrips, the tradition of inquiry that we know as aesthetics began with Kant, a disciple of Descartes' proposition that mind and body are separable, who believed our appreciation of the beauty of an object cannot be a purely physical one, but must also be based on the response of the rational mind.[2] Modern aesthetics has been concerned with uncovering the social values held by a group of people, which would lead them to hold certain objects as more beautiful, worthy of appreciation, important, etc. than others, and the social institutions of power and influence that promote and privilege these values. In particular, modern aesthetics concerns itself with what makes something 'art', as opposed to mundane or everyday things.

Meyer suggests a shift is occurring in the definition of aesthetics as a form of inquiry, especially within the field of media, religion and culture research. This shift is away from the Cartesian-Kantian tradition that seeks to create structures of value, towards the resurrection of an older notion, coined by Aristotle as *aisthesis*, meaning "our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it".[3] Taking on this old meaning, the discipline of aesthetics seeks not to find out what makes something 'art', or worthy of appreciation as such, or beautiful, important, etc., but seeks to discover what an object, sound, image *means* to a person or a people.

Moreover, this renewed form of aesthetic inquiry intends to inform us how humans connect with others, form groups and communities, and share identities, according to the meaning and value they place on images, symbols, sounds and objects that are shared among them. Here Meyer states her preference to refer to such groups as 'aesthetic formations', in that social identities are not static, but constantly shaped by the fluid exchange of symbols and meanings. Communities are formations in that they are both entities and processes.[4]

Public religion in late modernity

Since the late twentieth century, with the exception of some countries, such as the United States of America, Western nations have been experiencing a steady decline in attendance at Christian churches, and an increasing secularisation in spheres of public life, such as governments and schools. In Australia, for example, recent reports from the National Church Life Survey show that in the last decade of the twentieth century church attendance was in steady decline. In 2001, 8.8% of the Australian population attended church services weekly, compared to 9.9% in 1996. Monthly attendance also fell from 20% in 1998 to 18.6% in 2002. Between 1991 and 2001, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Salvation Army denominations closed between 2 and 9 per cent of their total congregations. The Uniting Church, Australia's third largest Christian

[2] See Meyer & Verrips 2008, 22.
[3] See Meyer 2009, 6.
[4] See Ibid., 7.

denomination closed 22% of theirs, though in this decade there was an official reform of the term 'congregation' as a statistical definition. In contrast, congregations belonging to the smaller Evangelical denominations, the Assemblies of God and the Church of the Nazarene grew by between 27 and 67 per cent, respectively.[5] While these figures may suggest some Christians are moving from Catholic and mainstream Protestant to Evangelical churches, research shows these churches (such as the Assemblies of God, the Christian City Churches and the Christian Revival Crusade) have the highest incidence of "drifting out", i.e. of people leaving these churches and forsaking church attendance altogether.[6]

Theorists such as Bauman attribute this decline to late modern culture's call for peak experiences but desire to keep religious institutions away from them.[7] For Casanova, the "privatisation" of religion is the product of an ideological campaign of modernity, both for freedom of conscience from ecclesial control, and for the progression of institutional differentiation for the capitalist economy.[8] Casanova sees the persistence of the churches to maintain a presence in the public sphere as not a resistance to secularisation but a "deprivatisation" of religion in moral response to capitalism, consumerist worldviews or their threats to traditional worldviews.[9]

Turner's secularisation theory aligns with that of Casanova in that he sees the privatisation of religion as the result of the modernist campaign to relegate institutions founded on "ineffable" truths to the private sphere for the benefit of modern democracy and liberty.

> In a democratic environment, the very idea that some truths are ineffable contradicts the ethos of modern society in which everybody assumes a right to understand or at least to have the relevant information. Democracy tends to promote plain speech and political campaigns are based on personalities and slogans and not only policies. The control of ineffable knowledge is compromised and the whole idea of hierarchically organized wisdom evaporates. We are moving from the age of revelation to the age of information where everything is, at least in principle, effable. The resulting crisis of authority is perhaps the real meaning of secularization [...].[10]

He departs from Casanova's theory in his understanding of the re-entrance of Christianity in the public sphere. For Turner, modern public religion is "low-intensity", favouring the practical, attractive and therapeutic at the expense of "authentic and viable forms of personal piety".[11] Even religion that appears to challenge consumer culture, like Fundamentalism, enters the public sphere as a marketplace, "selling a

[5] See Bellamy & Castle 2004, 8-10.
[6] See Sterland, Powell & Castle 2006, 12-13.
[7] See Bauman 1998, 70.
[8] See Casanova 1994, 40-42.
[9] See Ibid., 228.
[10] See Turner 2008, 221.
[11] See Ibid., 232.

lifestyle based on special diets, alternative education, health regimes and mentalities."[12] Even if (post)modern individualist and consumerist society has allowed religion to speak its values, it has determined the conditions on which it can communicate.

The emerging church movement is seen in the context of religious 'deprivatisation' and the conditions with which Christianity is allowed a public face. Driscoll identifies the emerging church movement as the third and last in a series of models, based on their level of engagement in the public sphere. Traditional expressions of Christianity, such as Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism, are labelled 'Church 1.0', that claim to retain their privileged place in modern culture, though have failed to retain an authoritative voice in postmodern culture. 'Church 2.0', appealing to public audiences and engaging in a 'culture war' to regain the lost position of cultural privilege, and managed as businesses that market spiritual goods and services.[13]

The emerging church is model 'Church 3.0', that accepts in a postmodern and pluralistic society the 'culture war' is won only at the expense of authentic spirituality, and therefore not worth fighting.[14] For Brian McLaren, a popular American voice of the movement, the emerging church seeks an alternative to the secular dilemma, where Christians choose either "a private, personal spirituality unconnected to public life" or "a public civil religion that compromises with partisan politics".[15]

For Moritz, emerging churches are noticed by the following properties: (1) a rejection of modernist dichotomies such as matter/spirit, truth/value, science/religion and sacred/secular; (2) a claim that individualism and consumerism are forces of alienation in urban society and contemporary Christianity; (3) a desire to retrieve ancient liturgical and devotional practices that reflect authentic community living; (4) valuing multi-media, multi-sensory communal worship; and (5) a disdain for systematic theology.[16]

Movements towards ecumenism and inter-denominational tolerance in the late twentieth century have meant that one's connection to a Christian denomination has less power in determining religious identity. Changing patterns in sociability in modern Western society are also considered a factor. Castells suggests that the idea of community may be idealised beyond the reality. Modern Western life, for the author, has seen the rise of personal relationships outside families and embedded communities (schools, churches, sporting groups, workplaces) as a dominant pattern of sociability, to the embodiment of 'me-centred networks'.

> It represents the privatization of sociability. This individualized relationship to society is a specific pattern of sociability, not a psychological attribute. It is rooted, first of all, in the individualization of the

[12] See Ibid., 233.
[13] See Driscoll 2006, 87-88.
[14] See Ibid., 88.
[15] See Streett ibid.11.
[16] See Moritz 2008, 30-32.

> relationship between capital and labor, between workers and the work process, in the network enterprise. It is induced by the crisis of patriarchalism, and the subsequent disintegration of the traditional nuclear family, as constituted in the late nineteenth century. It is sustained (but not produced) by the new patterns of urbanization, as suburban and exurban sprawl, and the de-linking between function and meaning in the micro-places of megacities, individualize and fragment the spatial context of livelihood. And it is rationalized by the crisis of political legitimacy, as the growing distance between citizens and the states stressed the mechanisms of representation, and fosters individual withdrawal from the public sphere. The new pattern of sociability in our societies is characterized by networked individualism.[17]

Castells blames not the Internet on the rise of networked individualism, but sees that this pattern of sociability works best online, as it "provides an appropriate material support for the diffusion of networked individualism as the dominant form of sociability".[18]

Castells' idea suggests the idealisation of community in a formal religious context. Especially for post-Vatican II Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism, the congregation is highly prized as a sacrament, the face of Christ's presence on earth, the starting point and destination of the church's mission. But in a late modern society the congregation cannot singularly represent the religious identity and practice of its members, but can only be a node in the network of everyday living that informs those things.

Identity online

Mia Lövheim, drawing on the work of Antony Giddens, sees identity as a reflexive exercise, a project of exploration and construction within the context of social relationships.[19] In her studies of online interactions between young people, Lövheim notes that users approach Cyberspace with the promise of creating and re-creating identities, away from the constraints of offline settings of social interaction. However she also suggests that when this freedom brings insecurity, users bring cues, rituals and mores from offline social experience to compensate. Social trust is a necessary component of any space where people interact to build identity, and these cues, mores and forms of expression are important to build a sense of trust for users who share a space online.[20]

Hine criticises approaches to web sites, such as home pages and blogs, as forms of self-presentation that neglect contexts in which they are produced, such as "the conception of the web audience and the technology's capabilities; the social and institutional location of the web designer; and the relationships

[17] See Castells 2001, 128-129.
[18] See Ibid., 131.
[19] See Lövheim 2005, 5; Lövheim 2004, 64.
[20] See Lövheim 2005, 18.

between web pages".[21] Taking into account these attributes of web-based information, we cannot assume online identity may be intrinsically multiple and fluid. Users online that make statements about their identity and their world, (both online and offline) are "strategic performances" that may well be a search to presentation of an authentic identity, that is continuous between fields of interaction both in Cyberspace and offline.[22]

Rhetoric surrounding online social media

Hypertext-based media have historically presented media theorists with challenges to conceptions of producer/owner, content/text and audience/consumer and relationships between them. Hypertext brings a sense of depth to a web page, a design structure that extends beyond the page, and offers further meaning to the text read there. Interpretation of meaning from text has always been the project of the reader, but in hypertext the reader has further control over what text is available for interpretation. While the writer has historically been the designer of the reading project, in hypertext the reader engages their own design to the reading.[23]

Hypertext, Enzensberger suggests, allows for the shift of power from producer to consumer in the creation and distribution of information. New media produce no object that can be contained or auctioned, and challenges notions of property and heritage. In new media, historical material is recorded in a fashion that allows it to be reproduced at the will of the reader, for the creation of social memory, a history that is manipulable by the "masses, not just the elite".[24] New media is emancipatory, the writer claims, in that it frees both text from the producer and people from the audience. Emancipatory media is decentralised, where each receiver is a potential transmitter, where the masses are mobilised, where production is collective and control is fuelled by self-organisation.[25]

The rise in popular distribution and consumption of Web 2.0 applications (blogs, podcasts, wikis, social networking sites and so forth) has brought about much utopian rhetoric about its present and future impact to communication and culture. Much of this rhetoric is centred around the key themes of democratisation, the rise of the user and the blurring of boundaries between public and private domains of discourse.

The rhetoric of democratisation claims networked media allow ordinary users to create media text that challenges the power of traditional organisations to produce, distribute and regulate mass media text. With the explosion of personal web sites offering a range of detailed experiences and opinions about local and

[21] See Hine 2000, 26.
[22] See Ibid., 144.
[23] See Burn and Parker 2003, 31-32.
[24] See Enzensberger 2000, 59.
[25] See Ibid., 64.

global events, come an increasing number of sources of news and information to rival the stronghold of mass journalism outlets. Likewise, online journals posted by tourists create more easily accessible, and perhaps more reliable, guides to other prospective travellers than published holiday guides. Cookbooks may potentially be made obsolete by the range of home cooking blogs made by home-based cooks. Democratisation rhetoric includes the claim that Web 2.0 media technologies give voices to otherwise marginalised groups of people, including women, young people and members of minority cultural and linguistic groups.[26]

As bloggers, podcasters and users of other Web 2.0 formats share information among themselves, online search engines (like Google and Technorati) give rankings of authority to those users who receive links from others. These rankings capture the attention of other media, including mainstream news and editorials. The rhetoric of the rise of the user involves both the claim that user challenges the place of the author or presenter (in the worlds of print and television respectively) as a source of authority in a world where the web is a dominant medium of culture, and the claim that the user profile is a commodity of exchange among participants in that medium.[27]

These sites may be devoted to the presentation and sharing of information about public issues, from politics through religion to knitting and software development, but will also share information about the user and their private lives, joys and concerns. Sites are developed for social bonding as much as for sharing of information, and private discourse enters the public domain. Bloggers are considered narcissistic and boring by those who come across these sites presuming to find the same sets of discourse that they would in newspapers, journals and magazines.[28] The rhetoric of the blur between public and private discourse involves the claim that private conversations occur in the public sphere, and challenge the exclusion of that sphere to certain types of discourse.[29]

An aesthetic study of blogging identity

These concepts and debates are illuminated in the exploration of online identity construction among Australian emerging church bloggers, who:

- look beyond their local faith communities for alternative networks, relationships, and modes of expressing religious identity,
- see in the blogosphere the promise of, and potential for, an open parliament on Christian symbols, language and practices,

[26] See Beer and Burrows 2007.
[27] See ibid..; Kaye 2005, 89-94.
[28] See Cohen 2006, 166.
[29] See Kambouri & Hatzopoulos 2007.

- endeavour to make the blogosphere a trusting environment for authentic expressions and explorations of religion, and
- create and consume both literal and visual text (including design elements) in the production of blog pages that express a blogger's identity and construct a space for interaction.

A study of the constructions of religious identities in the blogosphere, I believe, lends itself more towards Meyer's Aristotelian definition of aesthetics, than toward the traditional Kantian notion. Rather than considering the value of certain images shared in the blogosphere, this research is concerned with the interaction of literal text, visual text and design in blog pages that lead to the creation of an 'emerging church blogging aesthetic'. This aesthetic, Meyer asserts,

> induces a shared sensory mode of perceiving and experiencing the world that produces community. Community thus evolves around shared images and other mediated cultural forms […]. This sharing, it needs to be stressed, does not merely depend on a common interpretation of these forms and an agreement about their meaning (as asserted by interpretative or symbolic anthropology), but on the capacity of these forms to induce in those engaging with them a particular common aesthetic and style.[30]

It should be noted that Meyer's term 'community' is, in this sense, not a bounded or embodied one, as Castells would refute as idealised in an era of 'me-centred networks', but suggests "a new understanding of community in our time, which takes seriously the importance of media (in particular images), their bodily impact, and the forming of a shared 'aesthetic style'".[31] Indeed, endeavouring to locate an 'emerging church blogging aesthetic' involves uncovering how bloggers use design, literal text and visual text in the creation of a style that brings them together and sets them apart from others. An aesthetic study of emerging church blogging identity is the search for an *aesthetic formation* between bloggers who seek connections among themselves and distinctions from other expressions of religion.

The study

The sites of twenty Australian bloggers were identified for the purposes of the study, selected from the results of a search on Technorati's web log search engine after the following key phrases: 'emerging church', 'emergent church' and 'postmodern Christianity'. A further number of sites were identified through a six-month scan of comments made on the original twenty sites where links to other Australian blogs were made, and of links presented on the original twenty sites to other Australian blogs. Each of these sites mentions

[30] See Meyer 2009, 9.
[31] See Ibid., 8-9.

some connection with, or interest in talking about, the emerging church movement. Of these sites, two were authored by non-Australians who were living in Australia at the time of writing, and one was authored by an Australian living overseas. The sample of blogs appears at the end of this article.

Of the blogs identified, all may be found on any Internet search, unless they are no longer active. At the time the sample was identified and data was being collected, there were no restrictions from the general public to open and read either articles or comments posted on the sites. So for the purposes of this research, all information found on these sites is considered public documentation.

Posts published to these blog sites between 1 July and 31 October 2006, and between 1 February and 31 May 2007, were collected for study. Comments made by readers of these posts and sent to the sites were also collected. In addition, the home pages of each site were saved to the researcher's computer on 28 November 2006 and 28 June 2007. Written text was saved in Microsoft Office Word (.doc) format to the researcher's computer, while the URLs of pictures, videos, other embedded objects and links were also saved in these files for retrieval.

A blog's design

The home page of blogs is, as a matter of normal course, a set of design elements arranged according to the following structure. At the top of the blog page is the header, often containing a picture, logo or visual design, and that also contains the blog's title and a tag line (a few words describing the purpose or theme of the blog, or the author). Some blogs have columns of text on the left and right edges of the web page. This column may have user-defined content, such as a photograph of the author, a longer description of the blog's theme or purpose. It may contain items showing the blogger's interests, such as books currently being read or favourite albums and movies. The column may also display 'meta-data', i.e. data generated by the blogging software itself, such as lists of tags/labels applied to blog posts, the number of spam comments captured by data filtering software, a calendar of recent posts or links to archived posts. Traditionally, bloggers would create a list of other blogs and Internet sites that the blogger frequents, which would be listed in this column. Each of these lists and pieces of information are contained within boxes and are moveable as discrete design elements.

The main body of the blog page lists the blogger's articles, with the most recently posted article appearing at the top. Blog pages would normally have no more than ten most recent posts on each page. The title of each post is normally hyperlinked to another page that contains the post followed by any comments made since its publication (often starting with the oldest post). The date and time of the post's publication would appear either near the post's title or at the end of the post. A link will be offered at the end of the post that

readers who wish to comment can select. Tags/labels may also appear here, that would be hyperlinked to a page listing all posts that are similarly tagged. Some blogs also display a footer that gives information about the blogging software used, the name of the design template employed alongside its author and copyright information.

The capacity of bloggers to manipulate the blog page's layout, or play with design elements, is limited by the affordances of the blogging software (of which the most commonly used are *Blogger*, *WordPress* and *LiveJournal*). It is also limited by the blogger's knowledge of the affordances of the software, or ability to write and edit HTML code to amend design elements (e.g. colour, fonts, etc.) or layout (e.g. dimensions of the blog page and its elements, the placing of elements with the design structure). Nevertheless, all bloggers have the opportunity to design (and play with design in) their blog pages to create and express their identity within the network and for their readership.

Many of these design elements reflect the bloggers' purpose for their site. The header of Hamo's *Backyard missionary*, for example, contains a photograph of a man standing on a beach staring out into the ocean.[32] This reflects Hamo's focus on ministry in one of Perth's coastal suburbs. Philjohnson's *Circle of pneuma* has a minimalistic design, ensuring that readers' attention is not diverted from posts.[33] This reflects the author's emphasis on reasoned reflection and critique pertaining to the churches and their relationship with other faiths.

Many of these blog pages contain personal and identifying information. *The rev*, *[hold :: this space]* and *Missional diatribe*, disclose locations of the authors' offices and contact details.[34] *Jen's musings* and *Eclectic itchings* display photographs of the authors (and many other blogs contain photographs and videos of the authors with friends and family, scattered through posts).[35] Many bloggers are keen to show their interests outside religion, such as cooking (e.g. *Mountain masala*), Australian Rules Football (e.g. *Saintgaz strikes back*), movies and music (e.g. *Planet telex*).[36]

[32] Backyard missionary, http://www.backyardmissionary.com, Retrieved 28 November 2006.
[33] Circle of pneuma, http://www.circleofpneuma.blogspot.com, Retrieved 28 November 2006.
[34] The Rev, http://www.reverendjohn.blogspot.com, Retrieved 28 November 2006; [hold :: this space], http://www.alternative.victas.uca.org.au, Retrieved 28 November 2006; Missional diatribe, http://www.missionaldiatribe.blogspot.com, Retrieved 28 November 2006.
[35] Jen's musings, http://www.jen-reed-candid.blogspot.com, Retrieved 28 November 2006; Eclectic itchings, http://www.mattstone.blogs.com, Retrieved 28 November 2006.
[36] Mountain masala, http://www.craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain_masala, Retrieved 28 November 2006; Saintgaz strikes back, http://www.saintgazstrikesback.blogspot.com, Retrieved 28 June 2007; Planet telex, http://www.planettelex.bur.st, Retrieved 28 November 2006.

Intertextual play in bloggers' posts and pages

A discursive phenomenon that is evident in many of the blogs in the sample is that of Intertextual play. Intertextuality refers to the merging of texts from two or more different types of discourse within a piece of text or speech.[37] Intertextuality is a device that encourages the audience of a text to read it in a different way than it has been read according to custom, tradition, or culture, or where audiences would intuitively expect to see such text. Audiences, therefore, are challenged to glean a different meaning from it. Here I present four examples found within the sample.

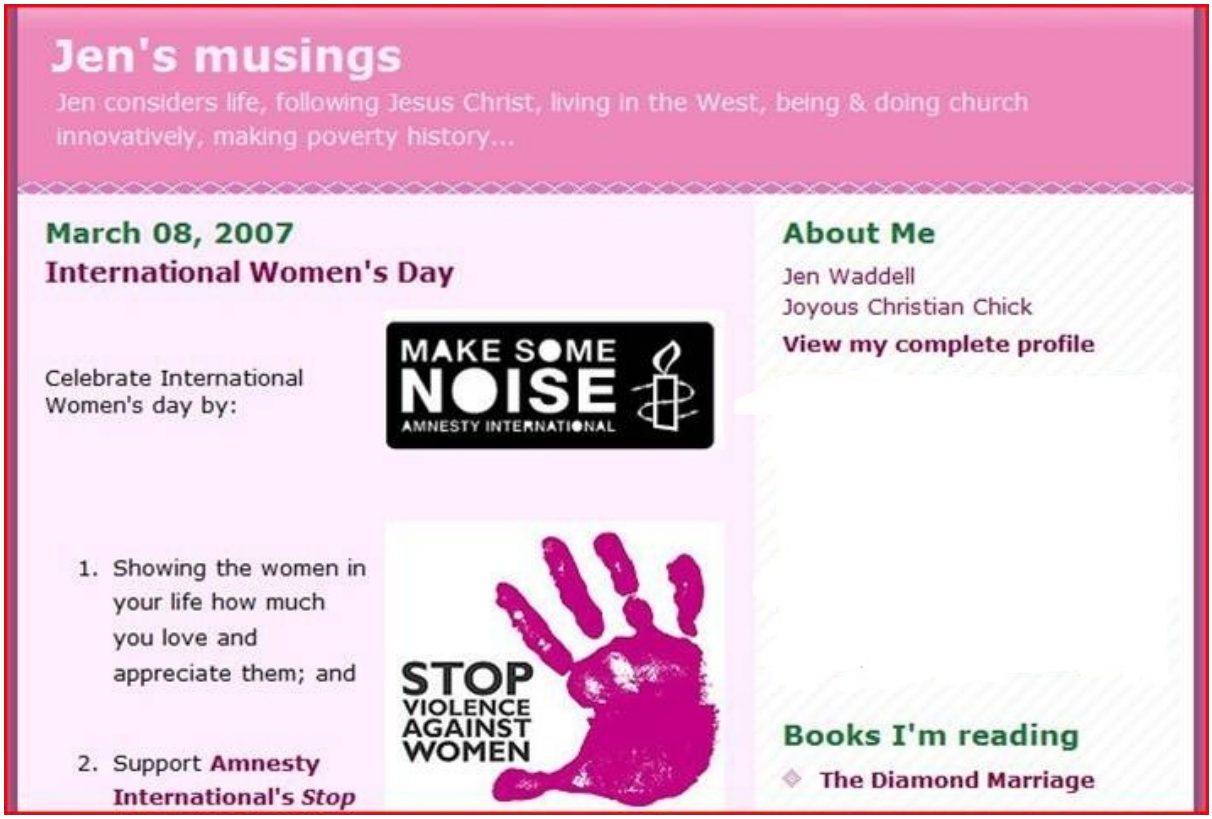
Jen's musings

Jen uses Google's blogging platform, *Blogger*, in to construct and publish her blog, *Jen's musings*. In 2006, *Blogger* offered fewer affordances to users in designs and personalisation, favouring usability for people who wanted to create and publish blog sites quickly. So Jen's blog, compared to others in the sample, appears simpler, with a two-coloured design scheme and standard structure (one side-column containing software-generated data) that is recognisable as a site built by *Blogger*'s software.

Jen chooses a colour scheme that consists of fuchsia (on the borders, header and footer) and rose (in the side columns), to present a site that is distinctly feminine, or a site that is (at least in white Australian culture) notably created by a woman. In the "About me" section of the front page she displays a photograph of herself sitting in the sun, smiling and holding a drink. Jen displays three words to describe herself in this section, "Joyous Christian chick". In these three words, Jen takes language often considered as offensive to women ("chick") and places into a phrase found in the discourses of traditional Evangelical Protestant religion ("Joyous Christian"). This intertextual play between religious discourse and common slang language sets the site for posts that are mainly focussed on justice issues relating to women in the world (such as women in poverty, women as refugees, etc). (Figure 1: for privacy, a photograph of the author has been removed from the screenshot)

[37] See Gee 2005, 21.

Figure 1:



[hold :: this space]

Cheryl uses the platform *Wordpress* to construct her blog, which offers more affordances to a more experienced user. In *Wordpress* Cheryl can offer more personalised information alongside meta-data in the side columns of the blog site, and can choose from a larger gallery of templates and colour schemes that determine the site's design structure. Her blog's header contains a photograph of words spray-painted on a wall in an urban street, lined with abandoned warehouses. The graffiti reads: "Surely I thought the door was here".

The first word of the phrase alludes to texts found in translations of Gospel writings, in particular speeches attributed to Jesus beginning with 'Amen', in the Gospel of John. Yet the phrase connotes searching and doubt. The photograph itself suggests the phrase and its message are out-of-place, even illegal. This photograph sets the site for posts and discussions on the use of art installations in the creation of worship spaces in urban settings, and the experience of doubt in Christian practice and theological inquiry.

Eclectic itchings

Matt uses *LiveJournal* as a platform for his blog site, which is comparable to *Wordpress* in the affordances it gives to its users for design. Matt places on his sidebar series of links to articles relating to certain themes or conversations previously posted on his blog. One such series is called "Meditations on the Tarot". Each of these posts contains a picture of a different Tarot card, captioned by a description of the card, which is followed in the post by a small passage from the New Testament and the author's reflection on the passage. In each post, theological reflections on the nature and identity of Jesus Christ are set against characters found in the Tarot story, such as 'The Emperor and The Fool' (Figure 2).

Figure 2:

Aropax(R) Nation

Using *Blogger*, Dave chooses and two-toned green design template and the web page's design structure is similar to that of Jen's blog. He, however, has managed to explore the affordances of *Blogger*'s platform software to insert a picture into the header, next to the blog's title. He also uses *Delicious* (a platform for

sharing one's Internet bookmarks with others on the Web) to label each of the articles he posts on his blog, as a way of arranging his articles into categories.

The tagline of Dave's *Aropax(R) Nation* is "Disposable thoughts from a disposable boy", referring to lyrics found in contemporary popular punk music that question criticisms made of young people by the Baby Boomer generation.[38] Alongside the tagline appears a photograph of anti-depressants spilling out of a fallen pill bottle (Figure 3).

Figure 3:

Articles about religion and the search for meaning are organised according to tags that Dave labels 'genres', and are related to music. Examples include 'Gospel music', labelling articles that refer to Biblical text and interpretation, 'Songs for the ladies', categorising articles about women in Church and society, and 'Old sad bastard music', relating to articles about Christian tradition.

A postmodern aesthetic formation

The above examples show bloggers' endeavour to place articles and conversation about religion in sites that refrain from using traditional Christian symbols and imagery. They represent an endeavour to create online spaces for the expression of faith outside the confines of the Church. Moreover, the literal and visual texts found in these sites display a challenge to the held notions of appropriate and inappropriate religious discourse, and show the bloggers enjoy playing with dualisms, such as feminism/femininity, art/dirt, faith/doubt, Christian/pagan, sacred/secular, hope/meaninglessness. Indeed, it appears the intention of these bloggers is to talk of religion from the perspective of the 'outsider': to offer a space for talk of faith, religious practice, and theology that embraces difference, doubt and unbelief. This resonates with what is found in aesthetic studies of postmodern works, as eloquently described by Terry Barrett.

> Many Postmodernist works of art are intentionally made to trouble any received notions of beauty, the single most important criterion for many works of art designated as "great" in the history of art. Postmodern artworks and theories trouble and threaten once very stable and intuitively accepted Western

[38] See Hopkins 1997, 17-18.

> notions of an authentic, individual, free, creative "self." In Postmodern works of theory and artworks, "the self" becomes willingly or unwillingly aware of "the other," of "difference," and of what counts as "good." Any former "must" in "the truth" of statements has been rattled for those aware of and open to Postmodern ideas and ideals. Postmodern ideas can be very destabilizing to long-held ways of viewing the self, the other, the world, and what is true.[39]

If we take on board Meyer's notion of community as aesthetic formation, then we notice in this group of bloggers a project of religious identity construction that involves breaking away from traditional forms of religious expression. We can also see among the blogs the creation of an aesthetic style, one that potentially binds bloggers and their audiences into a shared mode of reading literal and visual text. In this formation bloggers explore an express a common identity.

Conclusion

Those involved in the emerging church conversation find in the blogosphere the promise of an open parliament on contemporary religious assertions, symbols, language and practices. There they endeavour to create a setting for the authentic expression of personal faith and honest dialogue, free from constraints found in offline religious communities. Emerging church bloggers represent an evolution in the religious landscape, where personal religious identity is less defined by denominations and their structures, and more defined by the networks that individuals create. The blogosphere provides a global setting for new identities that cross denominations and distance, binding people together in not just language, but in the creation of an alternative 'space', done through the construction of aesthetic experiences, according to the affordances given to users by the technology.

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[39] See Barrett 2008, 197.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Paul Emerson Teusner received a PhD from the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne. His research focussed on the formation of individual and group identities among bloggers.

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APPENDIX: BLOGS IN THE STUDY SAMPLE

Blog title	URL	Username of author(s)
[hold :: this space]	alternative.victas.uca.org.au	Cheryl
Neurotribe.net	www.neurotribe.net/blog	Stephen
A churchless faith	achurchlessfaith.blogspot.com	Chris
A foot in both places	afootinbothplaces.wordpress.com	Tim
Aropax(R) Nation	aropaxnation.blogspot.com	Dave
If I ever feel better	ifieverfeelbetter.com	Dave
Backyard missionary	backyardmissionary.com	Hamo
Breathing space	breathing-space.blogspot.com	Eddie
Circle of pneuma	circleofpneuma.blogspot.com	Philjohnson
Eclectic itchings (renamed *Journeys in between* in late 2006)	mattstone.blogs.com	Matt
emergingBlurb	emergingblurb.blogspot.com	Garth
Exploring emerging embracing	gregtheexplorer.wordpress.com	Greg the explorer
Fernando's desk	fernandogros.com	Fernando
Jen's musings	jen-reed-candid.blogspot.com	Jen
Lionfish	underneathejetty.blogspot.com	Lionfish
Living Room >> A space for life	www.livingroom.org.au/blog	Darren R
Missional diatribe	missionaldiatribe.blogspot.com	Andrew
Mountain masala	craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain_masala	Craig
No diggity	diggerrandle.com	Digger
No guarantees	noguarantees.blogspot.com	Vawz
Notyetfinished	notyetfinished.blogspot.com	Andy
Pacific highlander	pacifichighlander.postkiwi.com	Duncan
Planet telex	planettelex.bur.st	Darren
Random murmurings	random-murmurings.typepad.com/random_murmurings/	Linzc
Random thoughts by Chris	randomthoughtsbychris.blogspot.com	Chris L
Saintgaz strikes back	saintgazstrikesback.blogspot.com	Gaz
Signposts	signposts.org.au	Phil, Dan and Lionfish
SmuloSpace	johnsmulo.com	John Smulo
The forgotten ways	forgottenways.org/blog	Alan
The merry rose	themerryrose.blogspot.com	Themerryrose

Blog title	URL	Username of author(s)
The rev	reverendjohn.blogspot.com	The Rev
The X facta	xfacta.blogspot.com	Kel
TheGeoffre(y)port	geoffreport.com/wp/	Geoff
Urban stone	urbanstone.blogspot.com	Andrew J
World Changers	steveaddison.net	Steve